

INCREASING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT – A UNIQUE COLLABORATION OF FOUR ARUBAN UNESCO SCHOOLS 3-3

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In March 2023 a unique project started, funded by UNESCO, to strengthen the participation of the four UNESCO schools at the island Aruba. Based on social constructionist thought, the four schools collaborated to make not only plans for their future collaboration, but also to build strong relationships between teachers, students and parents. We have written a serie of 3 short articles as a result of the project.

In the 1. article we describe the foundation of the project and some practical ideas, how to put social construction in to action. In the 2. article we will go more in depth and practice how to build a strong Vision within the schools, to improve the sustainability for change and future actions. In the 3. Article we will describe how we have worked to establish the start for increasing parental involvement, in the Unesco communities of the 4 schools. It may be clear that we ground our transformative change work on social constructionist theory not to confuse by social constructivism.

In this 3.-3 article we describe how we worked with the schools to awaken their vision about parental involvement ánd how this might influence future activities. The activities are based on social constructionist theory as outlined in the first article How to build Hopeful futures together.

Context



Within the UNESCO Participation Project at the island ARUBA, which took place January 2023, the school staffs of Princes Amalia, EduCampus, The International School of Aruba (ISA) and Colegio Hillario Angela, co-created many ideas for keeping the strong collaboration powerful for the coming years. Based on the ideas of social construction, all schools could think about relevant topics to work on. Based on the social constructionist thought (article 1) it is important to give participants *voice and influence* from the start of a change process. This increases

ownership for future change.

Parental involvement

During one of the meetings three schools decided to take the opportunity to work on the topic of parental involvement and how to increase this within their school community.

It is quite usual, and especially after the Covid-crisis, that teachers complain about parents involvement. It seems so hard for them to reach out to **all** parents and often it is the case the same group of parents support school activities. One of the mutual wishes within the UNESCO activities in this project was to partner with parents in all kinds of activities. In fact, to increase parental involvement.



What we often see in education is, in spite of the wish to collaborate, there seems to be two different worlds – the school world and the home world - who are alienated instead of connected. When we look closer at this from a social constructionist view, we see that the people in those worlds – the professionals at school, and the parents at home – speak their own language and make their own images about each other. Both, they are talking *about* each other instead of *with* each other¹⁶. And by doing so dominant stories are created about each other which slowly become way of how we see these worlds.

When we want to make better futures together, in service of our children/pupils , it's important to find ways to talk with each other and to become aware in how we socially construct such images, and best of all how we can re-construct new stories of cooperation.

In this article we will outline latest information about parental involvement and partnership, why it is important, and from this we will go back to practice: how did we work with the three schools to change their mindsets of partnering with parents in school community. We are convinced that, if we want to have sustainable change around parental involvement, we should change our minds, in the way we think about this.

We will illustrate how we worked with the staffs by using the Golden Circle of Sinek as a main structure, and the use of cooperative activities to give voice to all-in this process and to built relationships. This has lead towards a renewed vision of partnership, discovering strategies how to increase parental involvement and how we can use these insights for present parental activities at school.

We hope this final article will give the reader some ideas to build on when increasing parental involvement in their own schools.

¹⁶ Shotter

Parental involvement, what do we mean? What does latest research tell us?

Parent engagement is defined in literature as “the participation of parents in a regular, meaningful mutual consultation about student learning and other school activities.”¹⁷

Partnership is legitimized by the common interest of parents and school: together creating optimal conditions for children's development and learning, at home and at school. This in the awareness that together you can do more for the child than each on his or her own.

Partnership has different goals. Often these goals mainly focus on the organizational and democratic goal, the pedagogical goal - alignment in the approach and guidance of young people in their development and learning, at home and at school - remains underexposed¹⁸

As a relationship between people, partnership first of all requires connection and a shared focus of parents and professionals on children's learning and development. This can only be reached by Parental Involvement 3.0, see textbox.

Children develop better when home and school are well aligned.¹⁹ It leads to growth in their psychosocial development and promotes parents' own strengths. It is also important at a societal level that all children receive optimal developmental opportunities.

Good coordination between home and school is characterized by equality, reciprocity and joint decision-making. *Real partnership, in other words, where parents and teachers are on an equal footing.* Collaboration ensures that everyone can reinforce each other from their own expertise and experience with the child.

Five levels of parental involvement are distinguished:²⁰

These five levels, taken from research literature about parental involvement, can help us to look in more differentiated ways in how to involve parents in our schools or projects.

The usual way of parental involvement is that the school decides where and when parents can or are allowed to participate in education. And besides this, the school has a way of thinking that they look at parents as one same group of people. So they organize this from this mindset, at the same time expecting that all parents should participate in these defined activities. The result often is that the same parents will be active, mostly a very small group, and the larger group lets down, and is not really visible in these activities.

This is where the complaints of teachers starts: *we organize so many nice things for parents, why don't they show up? Our parents are not committed to our school! Why are we doing these things?*

If we want to establish change, we, the professionals in schools need to look with new eyes to parental involvement.



¹⁷ Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020

¹⁸ Reitsma & De Wit, 2012

¹⁹ Waanders, Mendez & Downer, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005

²⁰ Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020

We need a new mindset!

- *Every parent is different, so we must treat them differently*
As well as each child differs from others, so parents do. School communities characterized by so many different parents. We should look at it as a richness. So when all these parents differ from each other we should approach them in different ways.
- *Every parent is already engaged with their own child*
they take care at home, put them to bed, wash feed, talk with them, trying to do their best. So parental involvement does not start at school!
- *Every parent has different time and local possibilities*
Some parents prefer and do have time to participate during school time, others due to working times, do have more time in the evenings or weekends. Some people can spend a lot of time to support while others can only support a few times in a year.
- *Every parent has different needs and different qualities*
Like children, also parents have different strengths, qualities, knowledge and experiences. Also their motivation to support differs. So we should use their different talents differently!

When we combine these thoughts with the following levels of Parental involvement, we can design as a school, preferably with parents, a new package of many different activities. Literature shows the following levels.

Level 1: Being informed

At this level, the school informs parents about programs and activities, and parents can in turn ask for information.

Level 2: Participating in activities

Parents are involved in various events at school.

Level 3: Dialogue and exchange of viewpoints

Parents are asked for their views on the school and classroom objectives, and on their child's needs, to be explored and shared.

Level 4: Participate in decision-making

Parents are asked what their views are when a decision is made that affects their child. In the Netherlands, a clear example is the drawing up of the action goal of the developmental perspective (OPP), in which the parents must be involved be involved.

Level 5: Being given responsibility to act

Parents make decisions together with the school and are involved in planning and evaluating parts of the school program. A good example of this would be involving parents in formulating and evaluating the school's policies. Another example of involvement at this level is the role that parents can play as tutors of their own children.

To achieve parent involvement at the higher levels, teachers must be open-minded, empathetic and be competent in interpersonal communication.

Parents and family members are important partners in the education of their children. They have a fundamental right to be involved in the important decisions affecting their child. Parents of children with additional educational needs often need support and guidance needed in managing their child's behavior. There is clear evidence that when this is provided, both parents and children can benefit.

Implications for our project



It must be clear by now that increasing parental involvement in our schools, in our UNESCO projects, has a positive influence on our children. We decided to focus on teachers' mindset, and from this find strategies how to increase parental involvement in current activities. We are convinced that as soon teachers have a collective renewed vision about *WHY* they want involve parents and what the best ways are to do so, will lead to better activities, in which creating partnership is seen as a great opportunity in favor of our children.

In this article we will focus on the activities we have executed in this project. These activities must be seen as a start, and need to be followed up the coming months and years.

Increasing parental involvement, what did we do?

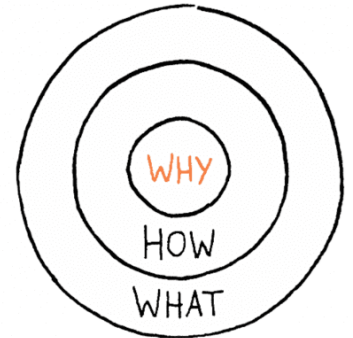
We used the Golden Circle of Sinek²¹ as a frame work for the training sessions. In this framework we can determine 3 levels, Why? How? and What? Sinek makes clear that too often we go to quickly to the practical side of change, without really knowing why we would do such activities? He turns the change process around and advices to start with the WHY? Organize dialogues and collective, meaning making processes. In social constructionist words: we are co creating new visions and therefor stories about Why we think we should have parental involvement in our schools and from this collective vision, we can construct together activities and strategies to achieve this.

The Golden Circle

WHAT
Every organization on the planet knows WHAT they do. These are products they sell or the services

HOW
Some organizations know HOW they do it. These are the things that make them special or set them apart from their competition.

WHY
Very few organizations know WHY they do what they do. WHY is not about making money. That's a result. WHY is a purpose, cause or belief. It's the very reason your organization exists.



Activities Why? (27 minutes)

1-2-4-ALL²²

1 (2 minutes)

The first step was co constructing and discovering *why* we should involve parents in our schools and UNESCO projects. We used the 1.24.ALL exercise to start. After a short introduction of the program, teachers were given sticky notes and the task to think individually about what in their words partnership or parental involvement is. (2 minutes)

2 (4 minutes)

After 2 minutes writing the group was asked to make pairs of two persons and to exchange and learn from their notes.

4 (5 minutes)

After step 2, they were asked to make new group of 4. With markers and A3 paper they were asked to make a mind map

with to collect mutual findings and find answers: What is partnership and why is it important?

ALL (15 minutes)

When all groups were ready we collected all written papers, hang them at the wall and discussed the mutual findings.

<https://www.liberatingstructures.com/1-1-2-4-all/> for more information

Liberating structures can be seen as very effective cooperative activities, in which every voice is given space.



Deepening understanding by using research outcomes (30 minutes)

The next step was as follows. The group was again divided in groups of 4 people. We prepared 4 different A4 information papers. Each group member out of 4 received a different A4 paper with recent research

²¹ <https://www.earthgifts.com.au/ebook/simon-sinek-start-with-why.pdf>

²²

information about parental involvement. Taken from Mitchell and Sutherland, 2020. The task for each single member was to study and read their own paper, and to discuss these different papers for the next 15 minutes.

By giving each member a different short piece of reading, we can work more effectively. Nobody has to read all the information, but is challenged to share findings after 15 minutes of studying.

All groups did use the selected information to enrich their previous work from the 124All activity. In this way the whole staff could deepen and refresh their knowledge.

Activities How?

The next step was to discover strategies to approach parents in better and more effective ways, by using the information given previously in this article: every parent is different so treat them differently. From social constructionist thought - being aware that language makes worlds - we decided to ask an appreciative formulation question:

When we want to increase or approach parents in the best ways, and we look at our own experiences, what are these best ways? What are the best strategies to do so?

Appreciative interviews 20 minutes

We prepared a short interview guideline with the following questions:

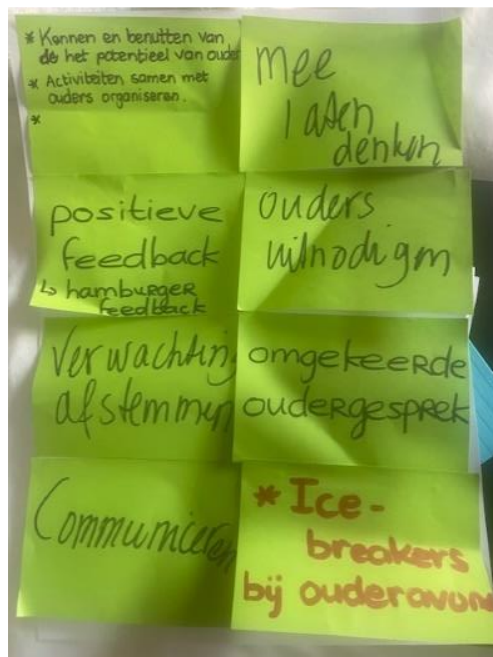
- *when you think back at your best way to approach parents to be engaged or involved at the best ways. What are your best experiences?*
- *What did you do? What seems to work?*
- *Please ...tell me more about it.*

We instructed the participants to give full attention to person A during the first interview, and after 10 minutes to change roles and give B the full attention. The pairs made notes at green sticky notes.



<https://www.liberatingstructures.com/5-appreciative-interviews-ai/>

Plenary dialogue (20 minutes)



After 20 minutes we put the group together as one group and talked about the findings: what are the best strategies we know to involve more parents in our school. The result was amazing, we together we found many strategies.

During these two sessions about the Why? and the HOW?, we created the Golden Circle at a large paper and put the written sticky notes on it. The last activity was to make a list of current activities.

Activities What??

The last activity was to collect current parental involvement activities. So together we made a list of existing activities to participate with parents in our school.

We discovered many activities such as a school trip, reading parents, visited the class sessions, evening meetings, child consultation, Xmas parties, Summer barbeques and so on.

Results of these training sessions:

The result of the sessions were an increased awareness who we as schools are normally inviting parents in our schools. From this awareness, we tried to break out of the taken-for-granted approach, and to give new meaning to Why? we want to have an increased parental involvement in the school and How? we can use strategies to achieve this. Each staff, did make a checklist based on the strategies which were proven successful in their school. Building relationship between school and parents and students was seen as crucial to work optimal at the students development. Furthermore the staff wanted to increase the relationships between parents. Therefore the list of proven strategies was very helpful. For example the Summer barbeque. A small group of parents always prepared this barbecue, then next they invited all parents to come and have a nice evening. But now, with the new insights the teacher staff became aware that by doing so, always the same parents did meet the same parents. The new checklist did help them to re-organize such a Summer Barbecue and to think and collaborate **with** the parents – how activities could be designed for this Summer Barbeque which would stimulate relatedness between different parents.

Further more each school staff used the input of the sessions to write a new document about Parental Involvement at their school based on the Why?, How and What of these sessions.

Because one of the wishes was to create a UNESCO FAMILY COMMUNITY. These finding will be used when new Unesco activities will be prepared the coming months.

When we want to involve parents in our schools we must treat them differently, and we need to go in relation to start a continuous dialogue about How to build the best future for our Children.

Selected resources

Mitchell, D., Sutherland, D. (2020). *What really works in special and inclusive education*. London Routledge
Waanders, C., Mendez, J. L., & Downer, J. T. (2007). Parent characteristics, economic stress and neighborhood context as predictors of parent involvement in preschool children's education. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*(6), 619–636. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2007.07.003> Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005

Shotter

Reitsma, M. & Wit, C. de (2012). Doelgericht werken aan en vanuit partnerschap tussen school en ouders. *Meesterklasbijdragen 2. Brug naar de toekomst. Partnerschap Ouders, school en buurt*. Nijmegen: ITS , Radboud Universiteit.

<https://www.liberatingstructures.com>